

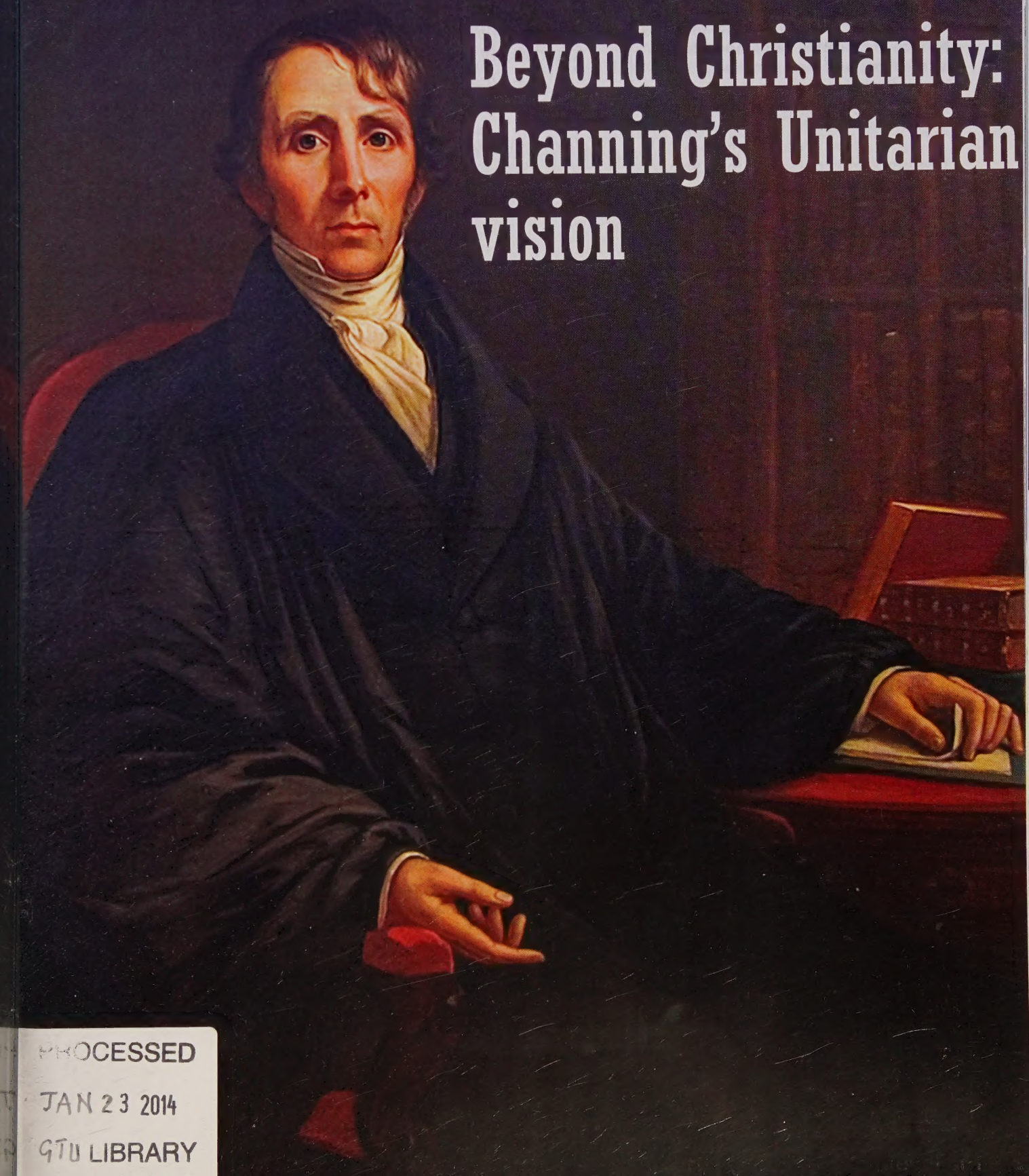
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Beyond Christianity: Channing's Unitarian vision



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The INQUIRER

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"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

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Inquiring Words

The feeling I got walking into a Unitarian Universalist church was like a fish finding its water. Instead of having a conventional service that morning, they were having a question-and-answer session. Answers were coming from the congregation as well as from the front. There was a certain amount of self-interrogation which really appealed to me. And that was completely different from having to believe in six impossible things before breakfast, which is what I had found really alienating.

– Sir Tim Berners-Lee, in a 2011 'Inquirer' interview

Editor's view

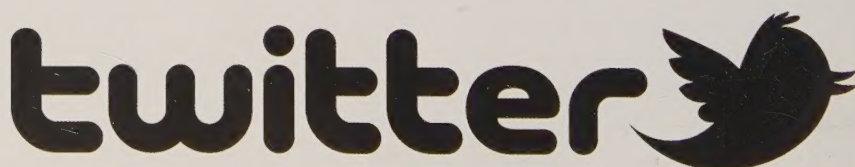
Severe lack of thinking

It is the nature of the BBC that it must be (or be seen to be) all things to all licence payers. Perhaps that explains the fudge that is 'Thought for the Day' on its Radio 4 'Today' programme – avowedly religious content with a secular title which means nothing. And, although that inclusive name might imply that thinking is what it's about, we Unitarians learnt it's far different. For behind the openness and inclusivity the name implies are rigid regulations preventing religious leaders who do not believe in a traditional higher-being from participating in the slot. (Except if they are Buddhist. In another inconsistent fudge, it's OK for non-theistic Buddhists to deliver a 'Thought for the Day'.)

On page 6, Kate Taylor has written about the Boxing Day controversy. Sir Tim Berners-Lee, computer genius, inventor of the World Wide Web and Unitarian Universalist, guest-edited the 'Today' programme. He sought to have the Rev Andy Pakula, Unitarian minister and non-theist, broadcast the Boxing Day 'Thought for the Day'. But the BBC said 'no', pointing to its rule that only people of faith may offer a 'Thought'. (It does lead one to wonder whether a CofE Bishop, who may be in the midst of a crisis of faith, perhaps suffering some doubt, should be expected to withdraw himself from delivering the slot. How do BBC programmers expect to know what is really in hearts and minds of those professing a faith message?) In the end, Andy did broadcast an 'alternative Thought for the Day'. And the Rev Jim Corrigan, Unitarian minister from Ipswich, did the traditional 'Thought for the Day', thus demonstrating both the diversity of Unitarian faith and our comfort with diverging views.

So, perhaps it's time for the BBC and for others to catch up with Unitarians. We know it is possible to be a person of faith without adopting a traditional view of God. It's about time the BBC figured that out.

– MC Burns



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What can Channing offer today?

Patrick O'Neill titled his Channing Lecture, 'More Than Merely Christian: Emerson's Wider Vision For Unitarianism'. In this excerpt, he reveals how Channing influenced Emerson.

William Ellery Channing, the acknowledged Father of American Unitarianism and one of his followers, Ralph Waldo Emerson are two of my theological heroes. Emerson, as I hope to make clear, would influence the second generation of American Unitarians to extend Channing's church beyond the confines of traditional Judeo-Christian theology to a wider vision. Emerson's wider vision for Unitarianism would draw inspiration and sustenance from many different theological sources, not merely or solely from liberal Christian thought.

I acknowledge my personal cultural limitations as an American Unitarian Universalist minister serving now his third year as minister of the largest Unitarian congregation in Britain. I have been a parish minister for 34 years, serving six Unitarian congregations in America before coming to Rosslyn Hill Chapel in London in 2011. My doctoral education was at the Unitarian Universalist theological school in Chicago. And while I have a deep background in American Unitarian Universalist history and theology and its shapers and shakers, I do not claim an equally deep background in British Unitarian history. While American Unitarianism and British Unitarianism have always influenced each other, their individual development was not always synchronous, and key characters and thinkers in one country did not always translate to the other. And still, each has much to inform the other.

I offer these thoughts as my invitation to a dialogue with British Unitarian friends and colleagues. I think Channing and Emerson both had ideas and perspectives that British Unitarianism today would do well to examine afresh.

For – and I hope you will forgive this American cousin for saying so – Unitarianism in Great Britain today does not appear to be thriving in any sense of the word. Attendance figures, actual growth rates among our congregations, an ageing constituency, a paucity of full-time ministry placements, the failure to establish hardly any new congregations in the past decade – these are not encouraging signs for our future, if indeed Unitarianism has any viable institutional future in Great

Britain beyond the next decade or so.

First, a brief review of Channing's contributions, and then turn to Emerson's role in our history, and ask how they might inform those of us who care about what this dear religious philosophy still has to offer in an age that increasingly likes to describe itself as being "Spiritual but not Religious."

Bear in mind that in religion, as in all other human endeavours, perspective makes all the difference. What to one person is eminently reasonable and obvious, to another person is often looked upon as dangerous and radical.

William Ellery Channing was a man who in his day in the United States was considered by some the most reasonable and eloquent voice of modern religion since the Reformation; the same man whom others rushed to condemn as an inflam-

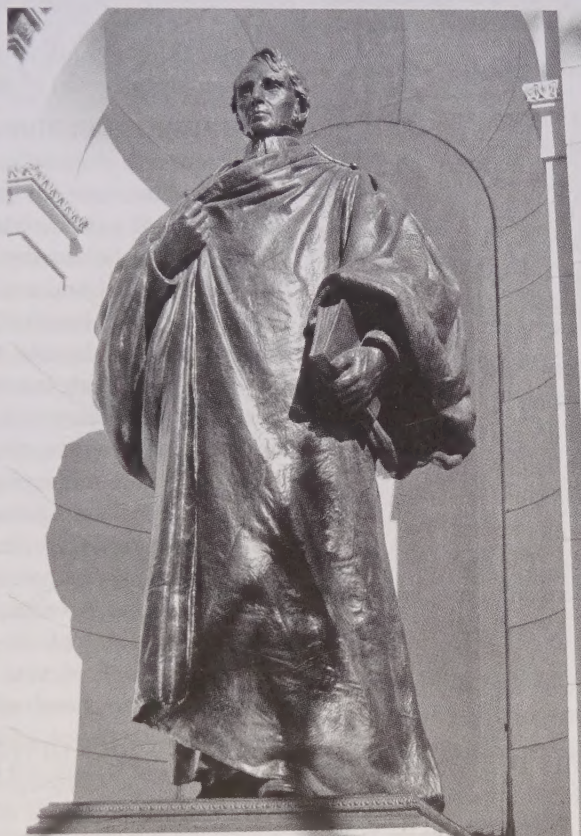
matory radical, a heretic who, had he lived in another place and time, would have burned at the stake for his bold questioning of traditional views of God and Jesus and the proper reading of Scriptures.

Channing was to Unitarianism in America what Martin Luther was to the Protestant Reformation in Europe: if not exactly the sole founder of the movement, he was most certainly the right man in the right place and the right time to lead a *Re-Formation* of predominant religious thinking. Like Luther, his personal intellect and his personal religious vision galvanized a religious movement that was waiting to happen. Like Luther, he had the courage to take on the religious establishment of his day to preach the principles he believed in. But unlike Martin Luther, William Ellery Channing did not possess a classic revolutionary personality. His was not a fiery, earthy temperament. He was, by all accounts, a painfully shy and reticent man, always uncomfortable with confrontation, an introvert who spent a lifetime, it

seems, trying to avoid the natural positions of leadership that his powerful intellect and gifted preaching ability continually thrust upon him.

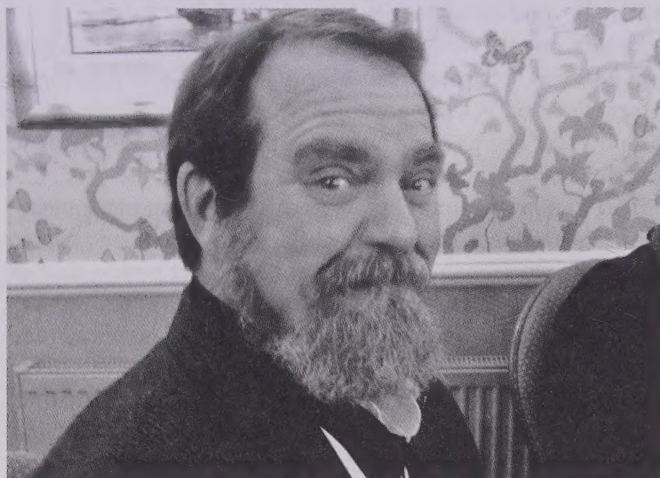
And yet, during a professional ministry that spanned 40 years at the Federal Street Church in Boston, there is virtually no single great social issue of his time that he did not powerfully influence. Historians Daniel Boorstin and Henry Steele Commager list Channing among the 10 major shapers of American thought in the 19th Century. "Before Channing," writes Boorstin, "there is literally no such thing as a liberal church in America." Garry Wills notes that Abraham Lincoln studied and deeply admired Channing's sermons and essays, and that in fact, Lincoln's immortal phrase in the "Gettysburg Address" referring to that government "*of the people, by the people, and for the people*" was a phrase he took directly from

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Channing's statue by Herbert Adams in the Boston Public Garden. Photo via Wikimedia Commons

Channing took his opportunity



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one of Channing's early sermons.

William Ellery Channing was born in Newport, Rhode Island in 1780, the youngest son of a large family. His prosperous father died when Channing was only 13, and the family was left dependent on the support of his merchant uncles. He was a brilliant student, mastering Latin, Greek, and French before he was a teenager, and through the sponsorship of an uncle, he was sent off at age 16 to Harvard College to prepare for a career in law.

Channing had been raised as a proper New England Congregational Calvinist as befitted his station in his community, but during his college years as he read deeply into philosophy and theology, he was confronted with a faith crisis. His own image of a loving God could not in good conscience accept the Calvinist notion of Pre-Destination, with its images of eternal damnation and hellfire for the unsaved. The more he studied Scriptures – he added Hebrew and German to his curriculum to do so – the deeper his doubts grew. It was a stressful time in the young student's life, and his health broke for the first time while he was at Harvard – probably what we would diagnose today as glandular fever.

Poorly most of his life

It was only the beginning of a lifetime of physical ailments for Channing. He was a physical ruin for most of his 62 years. There's a glorious, huge bronze statue of Channing today on the Public Garden in Boston just across from Arlington Street Church, and to look at it, with Channing's preaching robe grandly billowing around him, he looks like a formidable figure indeed. But in fact, the man was barely five feet tall; he weighed only about 100 pounds at his healthiest. He suffered from deafness and gout and dyspepsia. He knew other pains as well. He lost his father at age 13, two of his own children died at an early age, and his beloved wife was taken with a crippling arthritis. When Channing's closest brother died, he left a young son in Channing's care.

On the surface then, Channing's life carried more than its share of pain and sorrow. Yet, despite all this, he is remembered as a happy man, a genteel and generous soul, a loving pastor who although not gregarious and never really comfortable in the personal encounters required in ministry, nevertheless always made time for his people when they needed him. He was clearly most comfortable in the privacy and security of his study from which he produced fantastically prolific sermons and essays and lectures, all of which emanated a rich and

Channing held people with his themes of love and peace and justice. Always and again he returned to his great central focus: the dignity of human nature as created by a loving God, the potential greatness of the human soul.

– Patrick O'Neill

hopeful theology, full of optimism and affirmation of God's love and the potential of the human spirit.

Dramatic sermons from chronic introvert

His sermons, in accordance with the custom of his day, averaged some two hours in length, and in an age of great oratory, Channing was an acknowledged master, as lively and dramatic in the pulpit as he was shy and introverted outside of it. (It was said Channing would cross a street to avoid having to chat with parishioners coming the other way, then get up in front of hundreds on Sunday and hold them spellbound.) His preaching was said to be mesmerising. His New England predecessor of the previous century, Jonathan Edwards, relied on fire and brimstone to keep his congregation's attention in the pulpit. Channing, quite to the contrary, held people with his themes of love and peace and justice. Always and again he returned to his great central focus: the dignity of human nature as created by a loving God, the potential greatness of the human soul.

But remember, *in religion as in all other human endeavours, perspective makes all the difference. What to one person is eminently reasonable and obvious, to another person is often seen as dangerous and radical.*

Churches divided by Enlightenment

By 1819, the Congregationalist churches of New England were divided in all but name between the conservative majority of Calvinists of the Old Order, whose traditional clergy clung to the gloomy tenets of Calvinist fire and brimstone, and an increasing number of churches whose clergy leaned toward the more liberal intellectual and philosophical influences of the Enlightenment. (In fact, they were called 'New Light' Protestants.) Most of the New Light clergy were recent Harvard Divinity School graduates, and among their 'dangerous' doctrines, they openly questioned not only Pre-Destination, but also the true place of Jesus, Biblical literal interpretation, Revelation, Miracles, and the validity of the Trinity itself as Christian doctrine.

Boston printing presses were cranking out theological treatises, local clergy debates, heated letters to the editor, and anonymous pamphlets by the thousands in 1819, something hard for us to imagine today, and it was clear that Congregationalism, then the largest Protestant denomination in America, was about ready to split at the seams.

The occasion came on May 5, 1819 when a young star student of Harvard Divinity School, Jared Sparks, was ordained by the Congregationalist Church of Baltimore. (Sparks him-

(Continued on next page)

Articulating the Unitarian heart

(Continued from previous page)

self would one day become President of Harvard College.) With the encouragement of the New Light clergy of Boston, Sparks invited William Ellery Channing to deliver the Ordination Sermon. It was a carefully chosen occasion, an ordination ceremony attended by several hundred clergy who travelled down to Baltimore from New England to attend. Channing titled his sermon that day, *Unitarian Christianity*. Even Channing could not have known the explosive impact his sermon would have on American Protestantism.

Baltimore sermon sold 25,000 copies

In last year's Channing Lecture, David Usher nicely summed up the main points of the Baltimore Sermon: The Unity of God, a rejection of the notion of the Trinity as taught in traditional Christianity; The human nature of Jesus; the claim for a God of Love and Mercy over the Calvinist God of Vengeance and hellfire; the outright rejection of the doctrine of Pre-Destination; and the rejection of formal Creeds.

Within a month after the Baltimore Sermon, as it came to be called, some 25,000 pamphlets of its text were sold in Boston alone. Within two years, over a hundred New England Congregationalist churches declared themselves to be "Unitarian" in theology. Within five years, more than 200 parishes officially left the Congregationalist fold and established a new liberal denomination, the American Unitarian Association of Churches. Its first elected President was the Rev William Ellery Channing, who neither sought the position nor wanted it, but who was persuaded that his eminence and eloquence were essential to the survival of the fledgling movement.

In his biography of Channing, Jack Mendelsohn writes, *by enshrining reason, experience, and conscience at the heart of Christian life, by declaring that revelation and salvation must be measured by human character rather than by dogmatic pronouncement, Channing wanted to provide a relevant rational Christian option.* And of course, what his own career would demonstrate, and what the association he launched would experience over the next century and a half, is that such flaunting of orthodox authority and tradition is seen by many as dangerous radicalism. *For in religion as in all other human endeavours, perspective makes all the difference.*

Reluctant radical worked for reform

Before his death, William Ellery Channing would go on to lend his leadership and his energies to virtually every major reform movement of his day: abolition of slavery, Women's Rights, prison reform, peace, temperance, and mental health reform all claimed his attention at one time or another. Jack Mendelsohn says that if there is a continuous theme to his life, it is that of a kind of "reluctant radicalism." Not radicalism for the sake of sensationalism or passing fad or fashion for celebrity. Not radicalism when it is chic or safe. But radicalism that is an informed deep loyalty to principle.

Why reluctant, then? Because the wise man or woman knows that such radicalism, such informed dramatic loyalty to principle, always exacts a price. The world cannot tolerate radical truth because radical truth or principle always puts the world to shame. That's why we kill prophets when they appear. Susan B Anthony once said that when one woman speaks the truth, there is a revolution. Radical truth always puts the world to shame.

Channing's great central theme – the dignity of human nature and the greatness of the human soul – is still the core of the Unitarian heart, still the message that distinguishes this church from the modern-day religious purveyors of gloom and doom theology.

Why was Channing reluctant? Why was Moses reluctant when Yahweh called him to lead the Chosen People? Because Moses knew what the price would be. Jesus knew too, when he said, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me." Martin Luther King Jr knew that radical truth puts the world to shame. "Like most men," he said, "I would like to live a long life."

Channing's reluctant radicalism, his leadership in issues that would place him in prominent confrontation with the orthodox beliefs and values of his time, his loyalty to liberal principle, are still the inheritance of our Unitarian faith. I believe that his great central theme – the dignity of human nature and the greatness of the human soul – is still the core of the Unitarian heart, still the message that distinguishes this church from the modern-day religious purveyors of gloom and doom theology. I like to think that his kind of radical love and radical peace and radical justice in all their simplicity and in all their insistence still undergird the church that Channing founded.

This then was Channing's great contribution: *he gave formal articulation to a theology that successfully separated a New Order of American Protestant thought from an Old Order of Calvinist conservative religionists. At a ripe moment in American Protestant history, Channing galvanized a growing number of clergy who leaned toward the more liberal intellectual and philosophical influences of the Enlightenment.*

Transcendentalists beyond Christianity

But this first generation of American Unitarians, however heretical their views might have been in the eyes of their Calvinist contemporaries, *never thought of themselves as being anything other than New Light Christians.* With the exception of the doctrine of the Trinity, which most New England Unitarians were only tangentially vague about (like most all other Christians, incidentally, who really don't begin to understand this mysterious doctrine either) the Unitarians of the day were hardly very radical theologically. Jesus Christ was accepted in most Unitarian churches as the one true Son of God, the divinely appointed Saviour of humankind. And while the Unitarians certainly valued a reasoned approach to interpreting the Scriptures, the older generation of Unitarians did accept the miracle stories of the New Testament as a sign of Jesus' divinity.

It was the next generation of American Unitarians, influenced largely by the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, and the Transcendentalists, that took Unitarianism beyond the strict confines of the label, "Christian."

The Rev Dr Patrick T O'Neill is minister at Rosslyn Hill Church, Hampstead. This is part one of the 2013 Channing Lecture he delivered at Golders Green Unitarian Church. Part two will appear in the next issue of 'The Inquirer'.

Sir Tim and BBC intransigence gave Unitarianism a high profile on Boxing Day

By Kate Taylor

BBC intransigence gave Unitarians a unique opportunity to provide alternative versions of 'Thought for the Day' during the Today programme on Radio 4 on Boxing Day. The inventor of the World Wide Web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, who is a Unitarian Universalist, was the guest editor of the programme. He determined that under his editorship 'Thought for the Day' should be given by an atheist Unitarian and asked the Rev Andy Pakula, minister of the New Unity congregation in London, to undertake the brief slot. But BBC Religion and Ethics restricts the morning faith-bite to speakers who believe in God. Andy could not therefore qualify as having a legitimate 'thought'. Instead, the broadcasting authority turned to a former journalist with their own World Service, the Rev Jim Corrigan. Jim, the minister at Ipswich and Framlingham, is a member of the Unitarian Christian Association. Insofar as there was an impasse, it was solved by Andy broadcasting his thoughts at 6.50am and Jim following with the 'proper' Thought for the Day at 7.50am.

From our point of view, entirely marvellous!

The first time a Unitarian gives the 'Thought for the Day' – and we provide it twice!

Our glorious diversity was apparent. As the Reverend Richard Boeke commented, between them a balanced view of Unitarianism came across.

We had further publicity when articles appeared the following day in *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, and *The Telegraph*, each focusing on the banning of Andy Pakula as the official presenter of 'Thought for the Day'. The issue gained further exposure on Facebook page and in comments on the newspapers' websites.

The intention of the BBC is that 'Thought for the Day' should relate to a theistic faith and to something immediate. Both our ministers spoke of Christmas.

Andy began by talking about celebrations with his family the previous day, exchanging gifts around a Christmas tree and having a seasonal feast. That, he said, might surprise the traditionalists. Moreover, at his London church at Newington Green he had held a Christmas Eve service and sung carols and spoken of love, peace, justice and hope.

Andy explained the significance of Christmas for him. 'As an atheist' he said, 'I don't believe that there is an omnipotent other who will intervene in earthly life to save us from natural dangers or to save us from our own worst impulses.' But he also expressed the view that there was no inconsistency in being an atheist and celebrating Christmas. 'While I don't literally believe the stories underlying Christmas, I do very much believe in its most important messages,' he said. 'Christmas reminds us that hope can come at the darkest times. It reminds us of the sacredness of innocence and the possibility of chil-



dren – that any child, however humble their circumstances, could change the world for the better.'

Christmas, Andy said, reminds of the guidance of Jesus of Nazareth, who talked about loving one another despite difference and offered a vision of a world of economic and social justice – lessons we need to hear today. But no tradition, he went on, has all the answers or a monopoly of truth. He spoke of the winter solstice and its wisdom about connections with the natural world and its cycles, and about Chanukah from which we can learn that oppression can be overthrown and that all people every-

where should have the chance to live in freedom.

Whilst he ended with a Unitarian 'take' on Christmas, Jim began by referring to the Unitarian Universalist's principle of respect for the interdependent web of all existence and to Boxing Day being the ninth anniversary of the tsunami which brought devastation to the countries around the Indian Ocean. The generous response from across the world to the suffering the tsunami brought was, Jim said, 'a powerful example of how we are all part of this interdependent web'. He took that as a cue to speak of how Unitarians have reached out to each other and of our history of promoting reform whether in terms of the slave trade or, today, in terms of bringing different faiths together.

Jim then referred to our most recent campaign. 'Together with Quakers and Liberal Jews, we showed there are religious organisations who want to carry out same-sex marriage ceremonies in their places of worship, believing, as we do, that love between two people is a gift of God – a gift to be celebrated. We well understand that many mainstream religious bodies don't share our understanding of marriage. But the world we live in, and our understanding of it, is ever-changing.' At this point Jim neatly moved on to Christmas, recognising it as a much-loved tradition but bringing out its essential meaning for him.

In fact both our ministers ended in a similar way, expressing the fundamental message that pervades every 'Thought for the Day', whoever gives it. Jim said that the festive inheritance, rooted in the Nativity story, points to something deeper – to love within family, love for others, and concluded, 'Can we allow the Spirit of love to come into our hearts this Christmas, the Spirit that demands change – and help for those most in need? Andy remarked that, 'Without divine assistance, it is we who are tasked with creating an earthly paradise ourselves' and ended with the hope that, whatever our beliefs and perspectives, we will learn to love others more fully and more deeply and to include the excluded.

It was, of course, Andy's broadcast that was the news story. That an atheist was providing an alternative 'Thought for the

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Godalming chaos turns to celebration

By Sheena Gabriel

On Christmas Eve, after storms and heavy rain, with phone lines down and power cuts, we watched with bated breath as the water from the River Wey threatened our little 18th-century chapel. At around 11pm with waters still rising, chapel members struggled in the dark and cold, to put flood defences in place. Scheduled to do a wedding on 28th December, I contacted the bride at 11.30pm to tell her the wedding may be off.

On Christmas day we surveyed the damage. Thankfully, the main chapel area escaped flooding, although the baptistery was filled with water. The vestibule, adjoining cottage and hall were all flooded several inches deep. The grounds

were thigh-deep in places. Still without power, our valiant little band of helpers put their Christmas plans on hold, to start the clear up. We managed a Christmas meal of sorts, late in the afternoon – borrowing someone's gas oven. Thankfully, soon after, the power came back on.

On Boxing Day, the troops rallied once more, and relatives of bride and groom turned up to pump water from the grounds and clear drains. After finally tracking down the key to the



Godalming flood – before and after. Left: the Rev Sheena Gabriel outside the chapel Christmas Day on Meadrow, Right: the chapel, dressed and ready for a wedding on 28 December. Left photo by Bob Weston; right by Rob Oulton.

Unitarians on the BBC

(Continued from previous page)

Day' was underlined in the Today programme itself. Presenter Mishal Husain introduced Andy by telling listeners that Sir Tim Berners-Lee had wanted an atheist to provide the slot. This had not been possible because, as a religious programme, it had to be from the perspective of the speaker's faith. She called Andy's talk an 'alternative' thought. Two hours later, almost the end of the Today programme, the issue of the legitimacy of an atheist speaker was aired again in a discussion with Berners-Lee himself who was clearly bemused by the discrimination. Atheists represented half the population of the country. Moreover, they could also *think*. Why could they not provide the Thought?

So the Today programme on Boxing Day was good for us. Will it also bear fruit at the BBC? The writers in both *The Guardian* and *The Independent* questioned whether the rules governing 'Thought for the Day' should be relaxed to allow secular speakers. The principles of the BBC's Religion and Ethics beg the whole question of what we mean by 'faith' and by 'religion' itself.

At least both Andy and Jim demonstrated that Unitarians are people of faith – with or without belief in a higher power.

Listen to Jim Corrigan's 'Thought for the Day' at: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00sxxv6/clips

Kate Taylor is a member of the Wakefield congregation.

safe where marriage certificates are kept – and finding them dry – it seemed possible the wedding could go ahead after all! Boxing Day night, we feared further storms. But this time, all was well. After another day spent scrubbing and sweeping, the decorations went up; with the chapel looking beautiful, a relieved wedding party turned up for the rehearsal.

On Saturday, the bride and groom – Stephanie Carter and Simon Parker – looked radiant and untouched by the chaos. (There had been other dramas to contend with on their end.) The ceremony, even in my sleep-deprived state, was the most moving I have yet performed, and for that brief hour, it felt like a truly happy ending. And the events of those days gave me plenty of material for my wedding address – including the poem 'Atlas' by UA Fanthorpe, which I quote in part:

*...And maintenance is the sensible side of love,
Which knows what time and weather are doing
To my brickwork; insulates my faulty wiring;
Laughs at my dryrotten jokes; remembers
My need for gloss and grouting; which keeps
My suspect edifice upright in air,
As Atlas did the sky.*

The day after, we cancelled the Sunday service – and over 20 folk rallied round, with mops and buckets, to start the clean-up in the hall. Whilst Christmas may have been cancelled and the damage to our property is still being assessed – it could have been so much worse. I am reminded of how much we take our dry, warm buildings and creature comforts for granted, and also of the importance of family, friends and community – at times like this. Thank you to all those Meadrow folk who have helped in the aftermath – and to all of you who have sent messages of support.

Since the flooding, we have watched with bated breath as flood alerts have continued in the area, and sandbags remain in place. But finally, after weeks of anxious waiting, the rain has stopped, the sun is out and the river seems back in its rightful course – we sincerely hope it stays that way!

Sheena Gabriel is minister of Meadrow Chapel, Godalming.

In the beginning there was a shared story

I was watching the recent Simon Schama documentary series about the Jews and, after explaining the disparate nature, beliefs, rituals and cultures of all those who call themselves Jews, he said that the real thing that unites them, that gives them their Jewishness, is their shared story.

Is this true of us? And should we pay more attention to our story? I am not, really not, asking for more of the 'X Y was a Unitarian' which I loathe and cry out against at every opportunity. Nor am I asking for self-congratulatory services in which we boast about our past accomplishments.

I have recently read *Gender, Power and Unitarians in England 1760 - 1860* which is very interesting. I might at some point put together a service based on it. But I think I can only create a service if I can find in the past some message which allows us to look more clearly at the present – and how we, as Unitarians, should be active today. Schama makes it clear that Jews gain strength from their shared story. I think if we are to look back at our story it must be to gain strength so that we can go on achieving what it was once our goal to achieve – remember the old toast 'Civil and Religious Liberty for All'?

We have made some rather tentative steps recently – on equal marriage for instance, on assisted dying. If we look at our past can we, could we, become more vocal, highlighting aspects of modern life that are, for example, discriminatory and leading a small but nationwide campaign? Can we please stop drivelling on about Charles Dickens (if anyone is foolish enough to say to me: 'Charles Dickens was a Unitarian' will get the full half-hour lecture on what an absolute stinker he was) and perhaps look instead at such names as Carpenter and Aiken and Barbauld, but, more importantly, the projects and campaigns they created, supported, lead, organised. We used to be a force for change, can we, could we be the same again, despite our small numbers?

It is not necessary to do this in a service. How about a series of talks open to the general public? They would be particularly interesting if the local chapel or member had been involved in the anti-slavery movement/girls' education/prison reform, etc. It may, in some cases, be possible to link past action to potential future action.

We say, repeatedly: Yes but many of our members are already committed to social action outside the church. True. We are a church not a political party. True. We are small in number and have few resources. True. But, if you look back at the Unitarian story it becomes clear how interwoven are social justice and worship. I am not suggesting that every Unitarian church instantly mounts some dramatic piece of social action. I am merely saying that it would do us no harm, from time to time, to take a closer look at our story.

The other thing that Schama highlighted was that Jews were



the 'people of the book'. We, also, used to be 'people of the book'; all early Unitarian worship was entirely Bible-based. We no longer use the Bible alone for readings. In fact, in some churches the Bible is never used. Which is a shame. Firstly there are some great stories in the Bible. And they are stories which underpin much of our greatest literature. Secondly there has been much Bible scholarship, especially in the last 50 years, which is absolutely fascinating. I am still cross that I had to first hear the word 'Midrash' from an Episcopalian preacher not a Unitarian one.

Oh, and while I am on the subject, do you not think it is a shame that some children do not know the story of Noah or Moses in the basket or Jonah and the whale or Balaam and his ass?

Again, it does not have to be a service. Lots of people who have no interest in worship have an enormous interest in learning about the story behind the stories.

So (yes, you know what I am going to say) why not discuss this at a church meeting? At my local Progressive Christianity Network group I gave one of my usual little diatribes about church people not talking to each other (except in PCN) and one of the members told me that he had been a Congregationalist and that for them church meetings had been as important as worship.

'A Congregational church is therefore independent of all other churches; we owe no allegiance to church structure beyond ourselves. Our allegiance is to Christ alone. So a Congregational church is independent to order its own affairs. It employs its own minister; it owns its own building.'

'The idea of the Church Meeting is central to Congregationalism. The church comes together in a Church Meeting as – "the body of Christ" – which we read about in 1 Cor.12. We all come as we are: the good, the bad, the person with a deep and certain faith, the person with just a little faith, the old, the young, and we bring our gifts and abilities. As we are all different, like the parts of a body, we all have our different functions to perform and our different talents and abilities to share with the whole church. In the church meeting we seek to discover the mind of Christ for the work and witness of the church.'

See: <http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/ktcong/ourbeliefs.html>

We have taken our attitude towards church autonomy from the Congregational movement. Could we not also borrow the idea of the church meeting?

Rather than me telling you why you need a church meeting why not sit down now with a cup of tea/G&T and think about three things it would be useful to talk about if you had a regular church meeting.

Dorothy Haughton is a worship leader in the Midlands.

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Seeking out a rose in the snow

'And I'll bring you hope when hope is hard to find and I'll bring a song of love and rose in the winter time.'

The last few weeks have been particularly difficult within my wider family. Both my grand dad and my step brother Allen are very close to the end of their lives. I was feeling particularly low between Christmas and New Year. I had hit an emotional rock bottom. I rang my sister Mandy whose birthday it was on 27 December. As we talked, things began to change within me. During the conversation she said to me on a number of occasions that she keeps on looking for the 'love' and it is this that carries her

through the darker days. A couple of days later she sent me an email, that although filled with sadness and suffering it was beautifully transformative; she wrote some of the most beautifully faith filled words I have read in some time.

Mandy had gone to visit Allen; he had been taken into the hospital, for the final time. On arriving she looked around the grounds, there was little or no natural life to be found. All the trees were bare and the plant life had died off. This deepened her sadness as she walked inside. Sometime later as she was leaving she noticed a lifeless shrubbery which she gazed at for a few moments and then her eyes caught sight of something else, one of the most beautiful winter sights anyone could wish to see. A single rose, 'a rose in the winter time'. In that moment she realised that she had found the love that she had been searching for. This love has continued to grow as she passed it on to me and it brought hope to me when I was struggling to find it. The email was a pure song of love as she told me of that rose in the winter time. Strangely I've heard the birds outside my window more clearly these last few days. I've found that peace within once again as I have fully accepted life and stopped doing battle with reality.

There is a somewhat peculiarly worded Celtic wedding vow that I have heard uttered by several people recently. It reads:

I honour your gods

I drink at your well

I bring an undefended heart to our meeting place

I have no cherished outcome

I will not negotiate by withholding

I am not subject to disappointment

It is not what you would describe as romantic and yet there is something deeply moving about it. It touches something way down in the depths of my being. It is the line 'I bring an undefended heart to our meeting place' that has been resonating with me for quite some time.

Increasingly for me the spiritual life is about 'Living with an undefended heart', easier said than done, I know. We all have defence mechanism, things we do to protect ourselves from being hurt. I am sure we are all familiar with the fright and flight mechanism. There is though another reaction that



Rose in winter photo by Michal Glenc

perhaps we are less familiar with, it is certainly one that is less talked about. I have come to call this the freeze mechanism. It is something I am very familiar with, for I have utilised it throughout my life. Basically when trouble strikes a frozen person appears to continue to function normally on the outside, but inside, emotionally at least, they shut down, they internally hibernate. When it happens to me my neck and shoulders become stiff, my throat dries up, the base of my skull seems to warm up, my skin tightens around my face, I tend to blow out a lot and it feels like someone has just dropped

From Nothing to Everything

by
Danny Crosby



a great rock into the pit of my stomach. These are the moments when I build up my walls and try to keep life out.

How many of us spend lifetimes building these walls that we think protect us when in fact all they succeed in doing is block us off from the love present in life? It does not have to be like that. We can live with an undefended heart. Just imagine what that might be like.

To live with an open heart is to live intimately with all that is life. It is to experience life through our felt experience to not be ruled by what our minds project from our past, those disappointments and fears that have been built over a life time. To live with an unarmoured heart is about connecting with all that is there. Zen Buddhism talks about intimacy with 10,000 things, meaning intimacy with all things, all phenomena, that nothing is left out. This is precisely what it means to live with an unarmoured heart.

But how do we know if we are living this way? Well I have discovered that I am living openheartedly when I am not at war with life, when I am not arguing with reality and not avoiding intimacy, especially with my own thoughts and feelings. I have found myself arguing with reality at times these past few weeks, but thankfully this has not lasted, I have not remained in a frozen state for too long. I have opened my heart and once again found that love that is way beyond my understanding.

May we all find our winter roses.

Editor's note: Soon after Danny wrote this column, his beloved grand dad died. At press time, Allen was still gravely ill. The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Urmston and Altrincham.

Faith built on Christian roots will endure

By Richard Gaines

I must admit to being addicted to Doris' Column – Dorothy Haughton never fails to irritate me in one way or another. So it was again with her column in the *Inquirer* of 7 December. But this time I've given way to the impulse to respond!

I'm not a member of the Unitarian Christian Association, but I do take issue with Dorothy's criticism of the Christian wing of our movement. I think that it is rather important that our Christian roots are cherished and kept alive, and if there are those who are trying to do that, good luck to them. Dorothy mentions her membership of the Progressive Christian Network (PCN), so presumably she attaches at least some value to liberal Christianity. PCN is certainly somewhere liberal Christians go to speak their mind. And, as she has found, remembering her comments on her PCN membership in a previous column, it is much easier to hold a meaningful discussion on God, Jesus or the Bible in a PCN setting than in a Unitarian one, where mention of any of these can be greeted with a sharp intake of breath.

Perhaps she should think a little harder about those liberal Christians who "occasionally escape to a Unitarian church/chapel/meeting house so that they can speak their mind but always go home." Why do they always go home? Perhaps it's because they thought mistakenly that they were joining a liberal Christian denomination and found they were mistaken. We may have the words 'Free Christian Churches' in the label but it's not reflected in what they will usually find on the ground.

For most liberal, mainstream Christians, the Christian tradition of their denominational heritage is an irreplaceable resource, embracing as it does not only the Bible and the creeds but also 20 centuries of spiritual thought and experience. It is the anvil on which they beat out their personal faith. It provides

the foundation on which they build. It certainly isn't some sort of rigid straitjacket to which they have to conform – that is a misunderstanding and a misuse of creed. Good mainstream spiritual direction has always encouraged the development of a strong personal faith through a process of doubt and questioning. The building of faith in this way is certainly not something that only Unitarians encourage – it has been part of mainstream Christian 'best practice' for a very long time. The narrow-minded attitudes of certain noisy Christian traditionalists and fundamentalists are in some ways a very modern phenomenon.

The root problem for anyone, liberal Christian or otherwise, seeking to join us is that we are so often unable to present a clear definition of what we are. Having largely broken its association with its Christian origins, Unitarianism has lost that essential bedrock on which a faith needs to be based. A movement which uncritically harbours anything from a scarcely-religious-at-all Humanism to a touchy-feely Paganism doesn't provide much in the way of firm foundation and nurture – there is indeed something of a spiritual wilderness here.

I would take issue with the assertion that the worldwide Christian debate, characterised by Borg, Spong and Robinson, is 'moving into the world of Unitarianism'. Apart from the wide differences between the exemplars she mentions, none of them would ever think of discarding their fundamental Christian heritage in the way that modern Unitarianism seems to have done. Those of the liberal mainstream may be sympathetic to Unitarianism, they may attend our chapels from time to time, they may air their views among us, but in the end the fact that we have no clear alternative foundation to offer them means that they will not leave their current denomination to join us. It's a situation that, sadly, the 'mutterings' of the UCA are unlikely to rectify.

Richard Gaines is from Cirencester.

Bishop to preach at Oxford Unitarians

The Chapel Society of Manchester College, Oxford plans two special services in January and February. The first, on Sunday 26 January, features a Jewish composer. The other, on 23 February, will feature a sermon by the Bishop of Oxford. Both services begin at 11am and all are welcome to attend.

The service on the theme of *Holy Mountain* features Alexander Massey, a composer and music teacher who is a member of the Oxford Jewish community. He will preach during the service and also perform his composition 'Holy Mountain', written for the 70th anniversary of the Council of Christians and Jews. Alexander describes his work as "a modern *midrash* (with jazzy improvisations) on Psalm 87, an interfaith universal Psalm, embracing the equality of all humanity. Each nation and person comes from and returns to the same Source and is loved equally."

On 23 February, Oxford Unitarian Josephine Seccombe will lead the service with prayers and readings drawn from 10 faith traditions (Baha'i, Brahma Kumari, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Unitarian, and Zoroastrian). The guest preacher will be the Bishop of Oxford, the Right Reverend John Pritchard. His chosen theme will be "Doubt in the Life of Faith".

– Catherine Robinson



In October, the Reading Fellowship achieved a record number of 16 attendees. We welcomed the Rev Peter Hewis who led a harvest-themed service. We were delighted that he was joined by his wife and that four visitors also joined the service. It was a tight squeeze in our central Reading home, the library of a Solicitor's office!

– Sarah Benfield

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Nelson Mandela and the kingdom

South African-born **Jim Corrigan**, a former journalist who was part of the Anti-Apartheid movement and reported on the new South Africa, gives a personal reflection on Nelson Mandela's influence.

Did I ever meet Nelson Mandela? Yes, only once, a few months after his release from prison in 1990 – he spoke to a meeting of African National Congress members and Anti-Apartheid Movement leaders in London – and I was privileged to be in the audience. I shook hands with him afterwards and exchanged a greeting. Mandela spoke of the political struggles ahead, and he did so with realism and humour. It was an inspiring speech, as one might expect from such a man. But the inspirational effect Mandela had on me came much earlier – when I was a student in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the University of Natal: six to eight years into his long imprisonment. We students were inspired by Mandela's outlawed writings (and those of other ANC leaders), and we would gather to listen to recordings of Mandela's speeches, particularly his words at the end of the Rivonia trial in 1964, when he was on trial for his life – the speech ends with him saying he cherished the idea of a democratic and free society, and it was an ideal which he hoped to live for and achieve, but, if needs be, it is an ideal for which he was prepared to die.

Mandela and the other defendants received life sentences – and when he was freed after 27 years in captivity, he was able to put bitterness aside and lead the 'new South Africa', to a non-racial and democratic future, to begin building the 'Rainbow Nation'.

And of course, all the time the Rivonia leaders were in prison, struggling against their gaolers, the campaigns against apartheid grew – in South Africa and around the world. I played a small part in that great movement – in student protests, demonstrations and vigils in South Africa – with others, including Steve Biko – and later, in the anti-apartheid cause in London, and then in Zimbabwe where I lived with my family in the 1980s, working as a journalist.

I worked for the ANC, with ordinary members and with leaders, including Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma. And still the link with Mandela was there. In the late 1970s, I edited books of his speeches and writings for the International Defence and Aid Fund in London, which was founded by Canon John Collins. I took part in the campaigns to free 'Nelson Mandela and all political prisoners'.

When Mandela was released in 1990, I had returned to London from Zimbabwe with my family, and begun to work for the BBC. I wanted to return, but my family had settled back in Britain, and this was not to be. Working for the BBC, I returned to the new South Africa for the BBC World Service. I made a documentary series about Mandela's first government – and its successors.

My programmes looked at what the new South Africa was achieving, in housing and basic services. I looked at land reform; at language in the new South Africa (the country went overnight from having two official languages, to having 11!). I investigated political violence in Kwa-Zulu Natal, my home province. Then in the early 2000s, I returned to make a pro-



Nelson Mandela met former South Africa President FW De Klerk at the World Economic Forum in 1992. Copyright: World Economic Forum.

gramme about black economic empowerment. I charted the progress – and there *was* real progress: in housing, infrastructure, education, as well as extraordinary social gains, democratic gains. But of course, there were failures too – mistakes, setbacks – and some of the uglier legacies of apartheid remain.

Despite all this, the new South Africa has an exuberant spirit – this was evident in the crowds at the memorial service for Mandela in Johannesburg, and again at his funeral at Qunu in the Eastern Cape.

Let me return to something Nelson Mandela said during his powerful speech at the Rivonia Trial in 1964, when he was on trial for his life. He said the most important political document ever adopted by the ANC was the Freedom Charter, which calls for the redistribution of land in South Africa, and the nationalisation of the mines, banks and monopoly industry.

These are radical policies, and the Freedom Charter (adopted in the 1950s) remained the ANC's most important document when Mandela was finally released. That not all these ideals have been achieved is obvious, because in building a new society you are shaped by the environment in which you operate.

However a radical social vision was long part of the ANC's tradition. In 1928, the ANC President JJ Gumede returned from a trip to the Soviet Union, and felt able to tell crowds back in South Africa that he had seen '*the new Jerusalem*', he had '*been to the Promised Land*'. He may not have seen other things, but he was echoing words from Chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation: '*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away ... and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.*'

The vision of the Second Coming ... when God's rule, God's kingdom, would be established on Earth, a new Earth, the new Jerusalem. And this reminds us how closely religion and the Bible influenced both the socialist and the liberation movements of the 20th century.

The point is this: without ideals, without visions of a better world, of justice and truth, we humans are unlikely to achieve very much. But *with* ideals, either in religion or politics, great deeds can be achieved, as Nelson Mandela has shown so magnificently.

The Rev Jim Corrigan is Minister at Ipswich and Framlingham. This article is based on a sermon he gave in Ipswich on Sunday, 15 December.